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Learning strategies used by unsuccessful students according to their attitudes towards social studies courses

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze the effects of the attitudes of unsuccessful students at 4th grade of elementary school on the learning strategies they use. This research is a qualitative one, in which thorough interview technique is used. These schools were randomly chosen among the schools in Buca, İzmir, Turkey. The data in the research were collected through “The Interview Protocol of Learning Strategies”. As a result of the research, it was determined that unsuccessful students who have positive attitudes towards the Social Studies course use more learning strategies than the unsuccessful students with negative attitudes.

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Keywords: Learning; learning strategies; social studies; unsuccessful student; attitude

1. Introduction

In education, one of the variables which affects success is the attitude of student to elements like the subject, school and the teacher. [1]. Attitude is defined as the tendency to respond to an individual or an object that have cognitive, affective and psychomotor components. [2]. In other words, attitudes are in the centre of interaction with social life [3]. Attitudes affect the students' interaction with their friends, families, school and lessons. Therefore, students' attitude towards the course will add to their success. Bloom [4] states that students' attitude domain behavior is as important as their cognitive domain behavior and the former one has influence on the latter one.

Various research conducted in different fields such as Social Studies, Language, Science, Mathematics, shows that there are positive relations between success and attitude. [5, 6, 7, 8]. The positive attitudes students have will add to their academic success. In this respect, it is striking to see that in Turkey, Social Studies programmes which have the aim of raising good citizens seem to be arranged as a whole of abstract knowledge in which there is a flow of chronological history to students. This fact prevents the students from placing the historical events in a place they prefer in their own perception and dream world. [7]. Consequently, students' attitudes towards the course are affected negatively. Research shows that elementary school students' attitudes towards Social Studies courses are positive [9, 10], however, students' attitudes decline in the following years of their education. As the level of education increases, most young people start to find Social Studies courses boring, difficult, and unrelated to real life and they state that the course has no relevance to their future career. Massey and Dombusy state that 9th and 12th grade students prefer Social Studies in the last place when compared to other subject matters like Mathematics and English [11]. Other research findings in the literature review show similar results, as well [11, 12].

The contents of Social Studies are organized as explanatory type texts. During the listening and reading activities in the class, students try to learn the explanatory type knowledge. However, students have several problems in comprehending the content [13]. They should be provided with better and long-lasting knowledge by causing them to develop skills to define the realities, opinions, time orders, similarities and contradictions and cause - effect relations in the subject [13, 14, 15, 16, 17]. Likewise, successful students seem to have mastered active learning by using learning strategies some of which are mentioned above. Many research findings which analyze the relation between strategy use and academic success show that there is a significant relationship between the two terms [18, 19, 20, 21].

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Another reason for unsuccessful students not to learn actively is their lack of strategy knowledge or use [22]. Research on strategy teaching to students with difficulties in Social Studies courses shows that the academic success of these students in Social Studies increases. [23, 24, 25]. In these courses, informing students about learning strategies and modelling them in this respect will not only help the students comprehend the lesson and understand the content but also make it easier for them to have positive attitudes.

The research shows that strategy use is affected by many student characteristics and at the same time affects the affective and cognitive learning products [26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35]. Highly motivated students with positive attitudes seem to use more strategies and this affects the achievement motivation, attitude and academic success positively. That is, this is a two-way interaction. For instance, the following researchers conducted studies to see the effects of strategy teaching and they stated that students' attitudes improved positively. These researchers and the strategies they taught were as follows: Keller [36]: problem solving in Maths; and Carroll and Leander [37]: graphic organizers and asking questions through cooperative learning in Social Studies. While Uttero [38] determines the implementation of planning former knowledge, guessing, concept mapping, summarizing and asking questions strategies through cooperative learning in Science courses as useful for students to improve their attitudes to recalling, concept acquisition and Science course; in a research that he studied university students' characteristics affecting their use of learning strategies, Ho [30] designates that highly motivated students with positive attitudes are more successful and they use effective learning strategies more frequently.

Regarding the research findings mentioned above, it can be concluded that attitude and learning strategies are essential student characteristics which affect the learning process and which are mutually affected. Positive attitude is associated with academic success, yet it does not guarantee academic success. Even if the students' attitudes towards the course are positive, they may not be successful all the time. Unsuccessful students' having positive attitudes may not be enough for them to be successful. Moreover, these students have to know effective learning strategies if they want to be successful. For that reason, this research studies whether the attitudes of unsuccessful students towards the course is a factor which affects strategy use or not.

2. Method

This research is a qualitative one, in which thorough interview technique is used.

2.1 Participants

4th grades of 5 elementary schools - randomly chosen among the elementary schools in Buca, İzmir, Turkey in 2004-2005 academic year- form the universe of the research. In order to have the interviews, 12 fifth grade groups, which were considered to be representing the universe, were randomly chosen. Taking the background information from teachers and reports into consideration, unsuccessful students (with the averages 2 or 1 on their report cards) were identified. Following the interviews with these students, 1 with positive and 1 with negative attitudes, were chosen from each group according to their attitudes towards the Social Studies courses; and in the end 24 students –12 with positive attitudes and the rest with negative attitudes- were involved in the sample.

2.2. Data collection tool

The data in this research were collected through Interview Protocol of Learning Strategies. In order to prepare the protocol, literature review was made. During this study, the interview protocol which Altınok [41] developed to determine the learning strategies used by elementary school students in Science courses was adapted for the Social Studies courses (Appendix 1). Students were interviewed using this test form of the interview protocol and recordings were made. The records were transcribed, the necessary changes were made, and the final form of the protocol was prepared. In order to identify the students' attitudes towards the Social Studies courses, Learning Strategies Interview Protocol including semi-structured questions was used. The questions are as follows:

1. What is your favorite lesson?
2. Why makes you like this lesson?
3. If you put your favourite courses in order, where would the Social Studies course be?
4. Do you dream during Social Studies lesson?
5. Are your dreams related to the lesson?^

2.3. Data Analysis Techniques

In order to analyze the interview results, first of all the audiotaped records were transcribed. After the transcriptions were studies, a list of strategies mentioned by the students were formed (Appendix 2). The strategies on the list were defined and later the interview transcriptions were analyzed by the researchers, taking the list of strategies into consideration. The answers to the structured questions were analyzed and coded by the researchers to identify the students' attitudes to Social Studies courses. In order to identify the reliability of the coding, correlation coefficient between the codings was calculated and found to be (r) 0.80. These codings were analyzed by the researchers through a calculation of their frequencies and percentages.

3. Result and Comment

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentages related to learning strategies, which unsuccessful students at 4th grade of elementary school say that they use in accordance with their attitudes towards Social Studies courses.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentages Related to Learning Strategies Used By Unsuccessful Students According To Their Attitudes Towards Social Studies Courses

Learning Strategies	Positive Attitudes		Negative Attitudes		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Collecting information	7	58	3	25	10	42
Forming questions	5	41	2	16	7	29
Answering questions	3	25	3	25	6	25
Getting help	5	41	4	33	9	37
Visualizing the recently learned material	1	8	1	8	2	8
Devoting oneself to the learning activity	9	75	3	25	12	50
Re-reading	7	58	6	50	13	54
Reading with an aim	4	33	0	0	4	16
Revising by selecting	3	25	1	8	4	16
Telling somebody else	7	58	5	42	32	50
Telling oneself (Self-explanation)	2	16	2	16	4	16
Summarizing what is learnt	2	16	1	8	3	12
Note-taking while learning	1	8	0	0	1	4
Forming a good atmosphere	3	25	0	0	3	12
Checking what is learnt	1	8	0	0	1	4
Revising	7	58	3	25	10	42

The most common strategies used most by unsuccessful students with positive attitudes towards the Social Studies course are devoting oneself to the learning activity (75%), telling somebody else (58%), re-reading (58%) and collecting information (58%). The ones they use the least are visualizing the recently learned material (8%), note-taking while learning (8%) and checking what has been learnt (8%).

The most common strategies used the most by unsuccessful students with negative attitudes towards the Social Studies course are re-reading (50%), telling somebody else (50%), collecting information (25%) and devoting oneself to the learning activity (25%).

It was seen that unsuccessful students with negative attitudes towards the Social Studies course do not use the strategies such strategies as reading with an aim, note-taking while learning, forming a good atmosphere, checking what is learnt and revising which unsuccessful students with positive attitudes say that they use.

According to Table 1, in terms of percentages, unsuccessful students with positive attitudes seem to use all strategies - excluding visualizing, answering questions and telling oneself – more than unsuccessful students with negative attitudes do. The percentages of the strategies mentioned above are equal.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The results of the research show that there is a significant relation between the learning strategies used in the Social Studies lessons by unsuccessful students at the 4th grade elementary school and their attitudes towards the lesson. In general, unsuccessful students with positive attitudes towards the course use more strategies than unsuccessful students with negative attitudes.

However, the use of strategies is low in both groups. In terms of using many effective learning strategies that could be used in Social Studies course, they lack strategy knowledge and use. For instance, they do not mention those task-oriented strategies they can use like analyzing the visual material used in the materials of the Social Studies course, underlining the important dates, periods, places, cause effect relations, creating visual materials and forming mind maps. This may be related to students' low level of success. Studies conducted with the students who have learning difficulties show that these students lack strategy knowledge and use [22]. Montegu and Boss [20] state that successful students are more informed about strategies.

When success level increases, the number of learning strategies used by the students increases, too [39, 19, 22, 40]. In this study, the reason for the failure of students with positive attitudes towards the Social Studies course can be regarded as the difficulties that they have with learning strategies, which is another student characteristic. The positive attitude these students have, affects the students positively in terms of strategy use, however, it is not enough. Although they have positive attitudes, their lack of knowledge and lack of learning strategies prevent them from being successful. These students can be more successful if they are taught strategies, and if their attitudes towards the course is increased. The students who are not good at Social Studies, who have negative attitudes towards the lesson, and who have problems with strategy use can be provided with strategy education so that they will be more successful. This process is expected to increase the possibility of a positive change in their attitudes.

In conclusion, unsuccessful students need to be informed about learning strategies and strategy use. This is a way to give unsuccessful students an opportunity to experience success. Students who experience success will make these learning strategies a part of their learning process by using them in new learning situations in order to experience success again. In addition, students internalize these strategies and adapt them for themselves. Moreover, they start to generate new strategies through new experiences. After all, such students develop more positive attitudes towards the course and, as a result, become more successful.

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APPENDIX 1

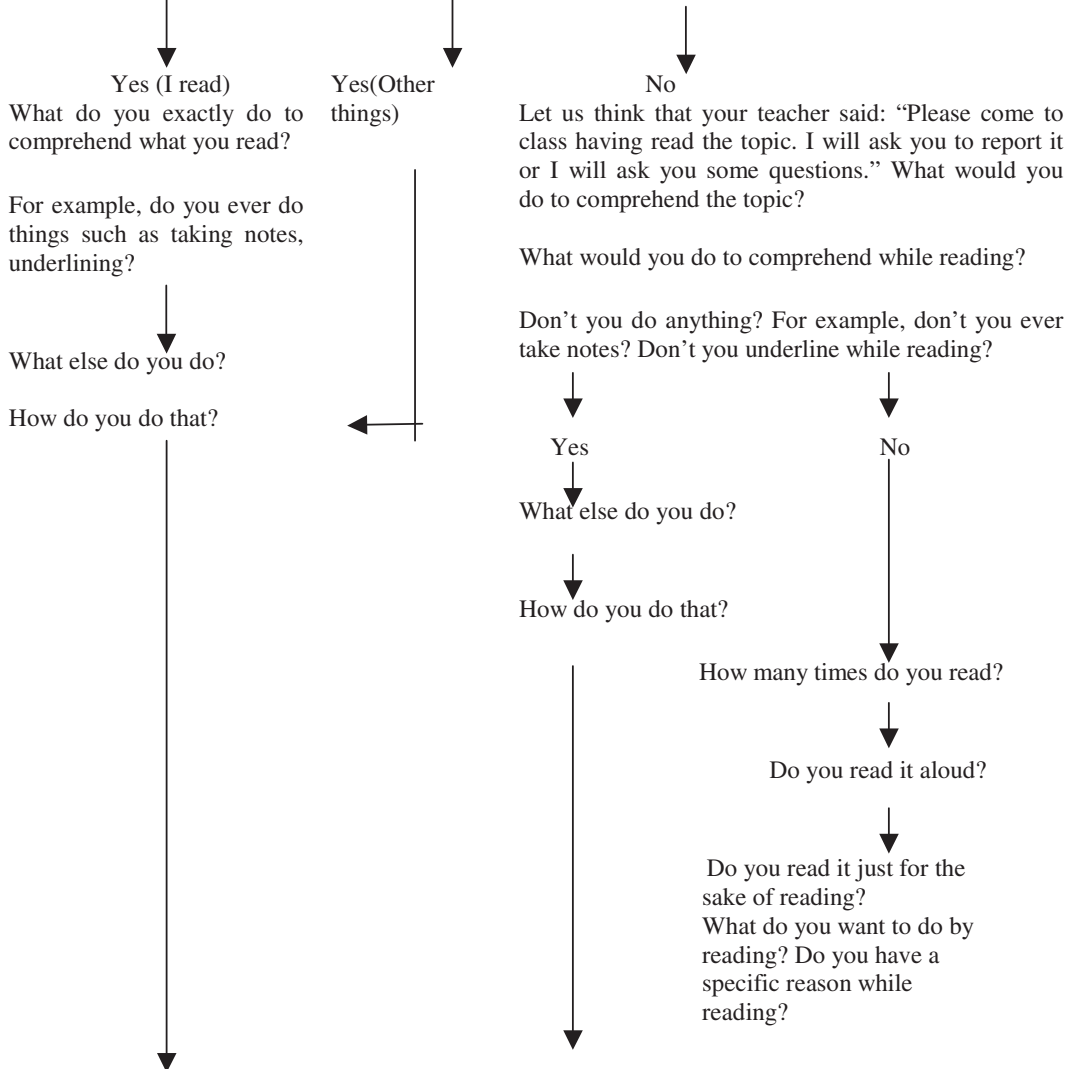
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

REMARK: I have been conducting a research to find out how students learn in Social Studies courses. I am going to ask you some questions about Social Studies course and in order not to forget the answers I am going to record your answers. Noone else is going to listen to our conversation. By making use of what you and your friends say, I will try to determine the things that the teachers should do in Social Studies course, so that the students can benefit more from these lessons.

1. What do you do to learn Social Studies?

What do you do to comprehend Social Studies?

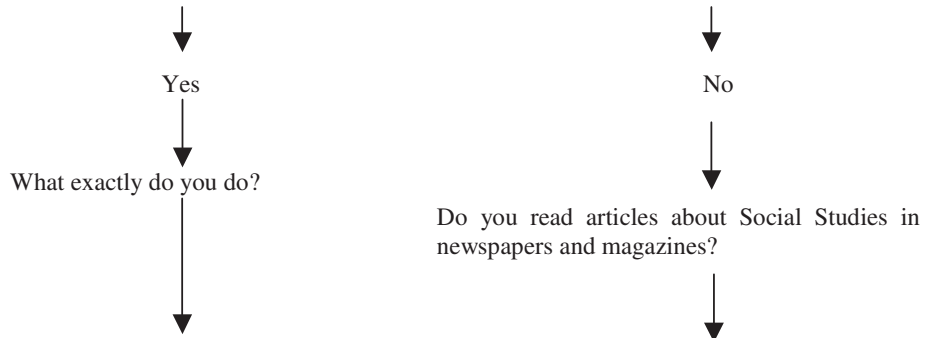
Do you have ways of your own- such as reading and revising- in order to comprehend?



2. What do you do at home to learn about Social Studies?

How do you study Social Studies at home – except for doing the homework?

For example, do you ever make research or observations to study Social Sciences?

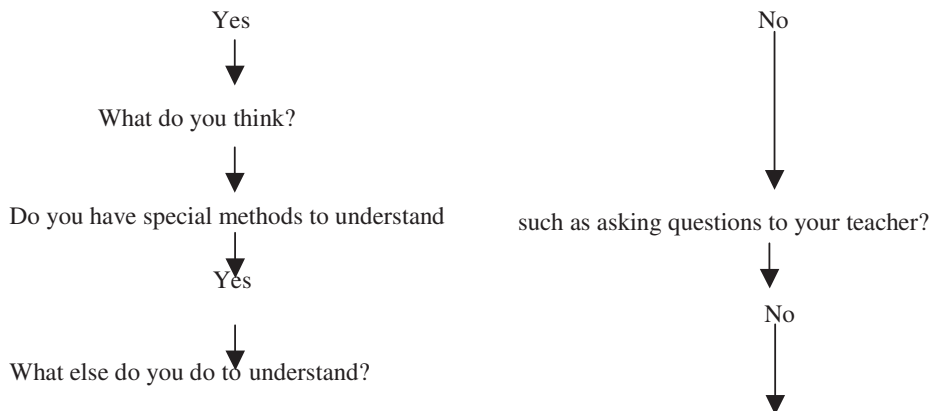


3. During Social Studies classes, in order to learn the lesson in class time what do you do?

What do you do to understand the teacher?

How do you listen? What do you think about?

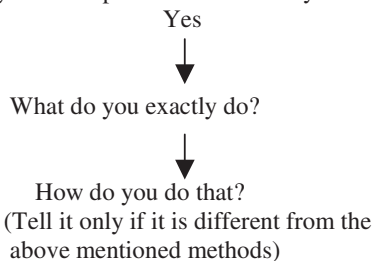
Do you think of things apart from the lesson during the lesson?



4. What do you do when there is an examination from the Social Studies course?

How do you get prepared for the exam?

Do you have special methods that you follow to learn and keep things in mind?



APPENDIX 2**Learning Strategies Used by Successful and Unsuccessful Students In Social Studies Lessons, Their Definitions and Sample Items**

Learning Strategies	Student's	Sample Sentence
Collecting information	making research from other resources related to the subject, in addition to the learning materials used in the lesson	"I search the encyclopedias to acquire new information" "I search the internet"
Forming questions	producing questions through thinking over the whole learning material or only over the sections which are difficult	"I ask questions to myself related to the subject" "I transform the important parts of the subject into questions"
Answering questions	answering the questions in the course book or in other sources related to the subject	"I answer tests" "I answer the evaluation questions"
Getting help	asking about the problematic point to a teacher, parents, sister, brother etc.	"If I can't understand something that I read, I study with my mother" "I study with my father in the evenings"
Visualizing the recently learned material	imagining the things s/he has listened or has been told about the subject during the lesson, forming a mental picture of what s/he has read in the relevant learning material	"I visualize the things which happened before"
Devoting oneself to the learning activity	focusing on the instructional task	"I focus on the lesson" "I concentrate on the lesson only, and nothing else interests me"
Re-reading	reading all of the learning material or only one part of it again and again	"I read again and again to comprehend"
Reading with an aim	reading the learning material trying to comprehend it	"I read carefully to keep the things I read in my mind" "I read and try to comprehend at the same time"
Revising by selecting	underlining, note-taking and repeating the key words and main ideas of the learning material written or defined by the teacher during the summary activities	"I go over what I write" "I underline the important parts of the subject and I focus on those parts while studying"
Telling somebody else	telling what s/he has learnt to her/ his parents, friends, etc.	"First I read, and then I give the book to my mother and tell her the things I read"
Telling oneself (Self-explanation)	telling what s/he has learned to herself/ himself	"I close my book and tell what I have just learned to myself"
Summarizing what is learnt	rewriting the important ideas in the learning material in an organized way	"I read and I write the things I remember in my notebook"
Note-taking while learning	writing the important words and ideas while reading or listening	"I find the most important and delicate parts of the subjects" "I note down the subjects which attract my attention"
Learning Strategies	Student's	Sample Sentence
Forming a good atmosphere	arranging an atmosphere which will help him/her concentrate and prevent him/her from interruptions	"I go to my room, and I read silently without letting anyone in" "I turn off the TV and create a silent atmosphere for myself"
Checking what is learnt	checking the instructional tasks completed and what has been learnt, and working out the problems.	"For the parts that I haven't understood While listening to the teacher, I read the coursebook" "I check my answers to be questions in the book"
Revising	revising the recently learnt subject	"I practice the things taught at school on the same day" "I revise at home every day"